

The Watchers

By Jack Ritchie

Around four-thirty when it started getting light, I got out of bed and dressed. I went down the stairs real quiet because I didn't want to wake Mom or Dad.

In the kitchen I had some jelly bread and milk and then loaded my .22 single shot. I put a dozen cartridges in my pocket and went outside.

Prince came out of his house stretching and yawning. He watched me head for the fields and came trotting after.

From the way I seen it come down, I figured it must have landed right in the middle of our woods. If it hadn't been for the moon, I don't guess I would have seen it at all.

I was looking out of the window before going to bed last night, when it came down slow and settled behind the trees.

I was all set to go out then, but I remembered that Dad had seen a black bear out that way and I thought I'd better wait until daylight.

When we got to the beginning of the woods, I whispered to Prince not to make any noise. He wagged his tail and I guess he understood. But he looked at me as though he was puzzled.

I went through the trees slow and cautious, not stepping on twigs like Red Joe taught me. After a little while I saw it and ducked behind some twin birches where I could get a good look without being seen.

It was round like a ball and standing on three legs. It was maybe twelve feet cross-ways and the outside was covered with little holes and scoops just like a grater.

One side of it was open on hinges and pretty soon a little man came climbing out carrying a box.

He didn't look so strange, except maybe that his head was kind of big and he didn't have much chin.

He looked real mad and he was talking to himself in a language I couldn't understand. I guess that was just as well, because it sounded to me like he was cussing.

I watched him for about ten minutes while he opened the box and took out some tools and began fiddling with wires on a panel just inside the door.

Prince was trembling with excitement and pretty soon he let out a yelp.

The little man shrieked and dropped his tools. He jumped fast back into the metal ball and a second later the open section snapped shut.

I gripped my rifle and I thought that if he was going to try any of that death ray stuff I was going to shoot his machine full of holes.

Prince couldn't sit still any longer and he took off toward the ball. He ran around it a couple of times barking and then commenced to sniffing at the legs holding it up.

I expected him to be disintegrated or something, but nothing happened.

After a long time I swallowed and got up. I went up close and yelled out.

"It's okay, Mister. I won't hurt you and neither will my dog."

I guess the little man must have been thinking it over because I had to keep repeating it for five minutes before the section opened again.

He poked his head out worried and careful. "Are you sure you can control that beast?"

"Prince Don't bite nobody when I'm around," I said. "Look! He's wagging his tail."

"Nevertheless," he said, "I would appreciate having some distance between that animal and me."

I took Prince about thirty feet away and

told him to stay there. He lay down on his stomach and thumped his tail a few times.

The little man got out of the machine and began searching the grass for his tools, but all the time keeping an eye on Prince.

"You're from outer space, aren't you?" I asked.

"What remarkable perception," he said. "You must be one of the brighter earthlings."

He found all his tools and then frowned at the wires he'd been working on before I scared him.

"Are you going to conquer the earth or are you just an Advance Scout?" I asked.

He looked at me disgusted. "I represent an intelligent race which has long past abandoned such primitive warlike notions."

I felt kind of disappointed because I was wondering how our atom bombs would do against their death rays.

He stuck his screwdriver contraption into the mess of wires and fumbled around. "I happen to be a scientist. An anthropologist, to be exact."

"Conquer the earth! What an idiot project!" he muttered.

He wasn't doing so good with the screwdriver and he was irritated. "My field happens to be the primitive humanoids of the planet Earth." He turned and pointed to me. "Of whom you happen to be a prime example."

"I'll bet it took you a long time to learn English."

He turned back toward me and tapped his forehead with his forefinger. "Our race doesn't fumble an eternity with simplicities. I learned English in two days simply by listening to your horrible radio programs. I also know all the major languages of this peculiar planet."

"Gee," I said. "You're awful smart."

He paused before turning back to the wires. "Americanisms took me an additional five days," he said, sounding bitter.

I watched him for a while. "Those wires in the center look all right to me," I said. "But you got a bare one in the corner there. It's probably grounding."

He didn't say anything, but from the way his back hunched I could tell he was mad.

He got out a small bottle that had a brush fixed inside the cap and painted around the bare wire. I guess it must have been liquid rubber or something like that.

"I'm not a mechanic," he said, talking real tight. "Or an electrician." He screwed the cap back on the bottle. "I'm a scientist! An Intellectual!"

"I guess your motor broke down," I said.

"The power plant is in perfect condition," he said snappish. He put the bottle back in the tool box. "It was that blasted ventilation system!"

It was getting to be a hot day and he wiped his face with his sleeve. "While we're on the subject, when are you primitives going to learn to control your climate?"

I couldn't think of anything to say except that we knew how to make rain. But I reckoned he knew that anyway, being so intellectual-like.

He pressed a button in the section he had worked on. There was a small humming noise and a lot of the tubes lighted, but not all of them.

"See!" he said, turning to me and acting like he was happy. "It still doesn't work! Wasn't quite as simple as you thought it would be."

I looked at the wiring leading to the tubes that weren't working. "I think you got an open circuit," I said. "The way that wire's bent, it looks like it's broke under the insulation."

His lips got thin, but he looked anyway and then turned off the tubes. The skin behind his ears started getting red when he felt the wires.

He took a tool that looked like a broad-headed pliers out of the tool box and

clamped it over the break. That took away the insulation and showed the broken wires.

Then he took out another gadget something like it and clamped it over the broken part. He pressed the handles and when he took it away, the break was fixed and the insulation was even back on.

The whole panel lit up this time when he pressed the button.

"Have you people been watching and studying us for a long time?" I asked.

"Of course we have," he said, and sniffed. "Half the doctorates in our universities are written on the strange, illogical behavior of you earth people."

He began climbing back into his machine. "I suppose that now you'll be running off to the authorities to tell them what you've seen."

"No" I said. "They wouldn't believe me anyway."

"Well!" he said. "You do have a faint glimmer of intelligence." After he was inside he stuck his head out and smiled very tiny. "I'll consider any one question you might want to ask. I owe you that for the slight assistance you rendered me."

I thought for a while and then I said,

"All this time your superior civilization has been watching us and we never even knew it."

He nodded his head, still smiling.

"What I want to know," I said, "Is whether there's some even more superior civilization watching and studying *you*?"

His head jerked and then his face got white. He looked up at the sky kind of scared and then ducked his head back inside the machine. Right away the open part slammed shut.

A belt-like piece on the top of the round ball started whirling and the machine rose off the ground. The legs retracted and pretty soon the whole outside of the machine started whirling.

As long as it was outlined against the trees I could still make it out. But as soon as it got higher and in the clear, it disappeared.

I picked up the tool box where I'd nudged it with my foot when the little man wasn't looking and headed back for the house with Prince following.

Maybe I could patent those tools and make a million dollars, I thought. Then I could buy myself a spaceship and study some primitives too. ◆